

Moral Absolutism: a Response to Relativists

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Introduction

Cultural Relativism is the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities are determined in part by, and should be understood in terms of, his or her own culture.¹ The principle makes epistemological and methodological claims that have deeply influenced the foundations of moral relativism², the philosophical position that ethical propositions do not reflect universal moral truths, but rather make judgments and claims relative to social and cultural circumstances, practices, and beliefs.³ Many anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict, have appealed to moral relativism in the hopes of inspiring an affinity for the plurality of values and inter-cultural tolerance. Unfortunately, moral relativism does not foster the cultural tolerance such anthropologists had anticipated. Rather, it has allowed for the deprivation and violation of human rights across the globe. Far too often, people like Benedict erroneously jump from the acceptance of cultural relativism to the affirmation of moral relativism. Cultural relativism does not entail ethical relativism. On the contrary, it demonstrates the pivotal role of universal moral standards in codifying the cultural divide.

Other ethical relativists, such as William Graham Sumner, argue that the moral standards of good and right are determined solely by cultural "mores", but this is ultimately not the case. Morality is absolute, universal, and objective. We may incorrectly infer individual moral judgments (as a culture or as individuals) but this does not make morality relative. It simply demonstrates our inefficacy in the foundation of moral determinations, as well as their implementation. In his essay, "Who's to Judge", philosopher Louis Pojman makes explicit the faulty reasoning of conventional moral relativists like Benedict, as well as the problems espoused by Sumner's appeal to the mores of a culture as the sole determination of relative morality. His

¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/>

² Also: moral, ethical or metaethical, relativism.

³ The terms metaethical, ethical, and moral relativism are often used interchangeably, and will be considered as the same throughout the course of this essay.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/#ForArg>

arguments imply the legitimacy of moral absolutism, and play an important role in the explanation of culturally relative moral determinations.

While we may incorrectly reason that an immoral action is moral, this does not make it so. The existence of moral and immoral action, while perhaps only *acknowledged* by the human race, is not contingent upon it. Right and wrong are not human constructions. Since morality exists independently of us, its existence is in no way relative to us; accordingly, relativist arguments are invalid.⁴ In its refusal to make trans-cultural ethical judgments, moral relativism permits any, and all, cultures' moral principles and behavior, allowing for gross violations of individual rights, and the perversion of personal and political powers.

The Shift from Cultural Relativism to Conventional Ethical Relativism

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict claims that morality is “a convenient term for socially approved customs”⁵ having no place in the objective, or universal, realm. She cites different values of particular cultures, claiming that they demonstratively prove the anti-supremacy of any particular ethical principle. She presents a number of examples of various cultural views pertaining to issues ranging from mental stability, homosexuality, and murder. Benedict asserts that such examples establish the validity of moral relativism. This couldn't be further from the truth. While there are certainly moral judgments that vary from culture to culture, as well as those that shift as a particular culture evolves, by no means does this imply that morality is culturally relative. It simply demonstrates our inherent imperfection, highlighting our inability to accurately establish appropriate courses for moral action. The fact that we can, and often do, incorrectly infer appropriate courses of moral action, and that our moral inferences tend to vary from culture to culture, emphasizes the necessity of trans-cultural moral deliberation. This substantiates the claim that we ought to work together, without regard for cultural differences of

⁴ Here I posit that, while it may be the case that moral/ immoral *action* can only arise within society, this does not mean that morality is itself contingent upon action. I argue that, as such, morality is not contingent upon society. I do not have to commit an immoral action (say, cause unnecessary and unjustified suffering to another) in order for such an action to be immoral. In fact, I do not have to think about it at all for it to be the case that such an action is immoral. Similar scenarios can be applied to any group, country, culture, and even the world.

⁵Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”, *The Journal of General Psychology*. Washington DC: Heldref Publications, 1934. In Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press, 2007. Pg 137

opinion, in an attempt to deliberately determine the moral judgments least susceptible to failure.⁶

One of the most striking examples Benedict provides is that of the Kwakiutl tribe.⁷ In this culture “it did not matter whether a relative had died in bed of disease, or by the hand of an enemy, in either case death was an affront to be wiped out by the death of another person.”⁸ When a Kwakiutl chief’s sister and her daughter were presumed dead after not returning from a trip to Victoria, the chief gathered together his warriors. Collectively, they determined that some others of the tribe would be required to “wail” (die), to remediate the chief’s loss. The warriors then formed a war party, and killed seven men and two children whom they discovered sleeping. Not only were these individuals innocent of any involvement in the disappearance, they were not even aware of the chief’s loss. After committing these murders, the warriors “felt good”, believing they had successfully ‘wiped out’ the affront against their tribal chief.⁹ Benedict argues that since within their society it was considered normal, even morally acceptable, to commit such murders, the fact that within most other societies such actions are deemed abnormal and immoral, is irrelevant. But here Benedict’s reasoning is fundamentally flawed. Just because particular cultures deem immoral actions as morally permissible, it does not follow that they are in fact moral actions, nor does it follow that morality is culturally relative. It may prove that “most individuals are plastic to the moulding force of the society into which they are born”¹⁰, but certainly not that we are unjustified in passing moral judgments upon members of other cultures. In fact, it is because we *are* influenced by the moral principles of the societies in which we are born that it is so pivotal we grant people of all cultures the right to call the morality of controversial ethical policies into question.¹¹

⁶ I say “least susceptible to failure” here because, even with trans-cultural deliberation, we will inexorably still encounter instances where we fail to make the correct moral judgment. But it is my conviction that only *with* trans-cultural deliberation do we create a higher probability of success.

⁷ “Kwakiutl tribe” refers to the indigenous people of Vancouver Island, Queen Charlotte Strait, and Johnstone Strait.

Boas, Franz. The social organization and the secret societies of the Kwakiutl Indians (Landmarks in anthropology). New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1970. Pg 317

⁸Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”, *The Journal of General Psychology*. Washington DC: Heldref Publications, 1934. In Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press. Pg 140

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid Pg 143

¹¹ This is due to the fact that without allowing for cross-cultural ethical judgments, we are forced to permit the immoral practices within other cultures, as demonstrated by the like the Kwakiutls indefensible murder of innocent people, allowed by the principle of moral relativism.

As a consequence of cultural relativism, Benedict argues we are not justified in dismissing or trivializing the ethical principles of other cultures.¹² She is absolutely right. But the dismissing of opposing ethical principles is precisely what moral relativism encourages. When we think that something is ethically wrong, and yet refrain from passing judgment, or perhaps merely from committing ourselves to such a judgment, we are dismissing the ethical principle itself, thereby trivializing morality in general; yet, this is precisely what moral relativism requires.

Pojman's Response to Conventionalism

Louis Pojman summarizes the conventionalist argument raised by Ruth Benedict, and even more explicitly by Melville Herskovits, as follows:

1. If Morality is relative to its culture, then there is no independent basis for criticizing the morality of any other culture but one's own.
2. If there is no independent way of criticizing any other culture, we ought to be *tolerant* of the moralities of other cultures.
3. Morality is relative to its culture.

Therefore,

4. we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.¹³

As Pojman points out, while tolerance is certainly a virtue, this is not a good argument for it. If morality is relative to culture, then we are not justified in asserting that, universally, we should be tolerant. This is due to the fact that tolerance is, at least in this sense, a moral principle. Accordingly the moral principle of tolerance would necessarily be relative to one's culture. As such, the moral relativist is not justified in contending that all cultures ought to adhere to it. As Pojman asserts:

Herskovits seems to be treating the *principle of tolerance* as the one exception to his relativism. He seems to be treating it as an absolute moral principle. But from a relativistic point of view there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other.¹⁴

The Mores of a Culture

¹² Ibid

¹³ Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*. Random House, 1972. In Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press. Pg 169

¹⁴ Louis Pojman, "Who's to Judge", Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press. Pg 169

Ethical relativist William Graham Sumner attempts to address some of the primary issues of conventional moral relativism with his claim that morality is derived from the ever-changing “mores” of society. Sumner purports that there exist cultural “mores”, certain moral folkways of a society. He claims that while mores are fewer in number than folkways, they are far more coercive. Negative mores are taboos, typically supported by cultural, religious, or political sanctions. Where “folkways” are believed to guide human conduct in the more mundane areas of life, “mores” are thought to control those aspects connected with sex, politics, the family, and religion.¹⁵ But, like Benedict, and Herskovits before her, Sumner fails to provide a compelling argument. He argues that “mores can make things seem right and good to one group or age which to another seem antagonistic to every instinct of human nature.”¹⁶ Stating that within the folkways, “whatever *is*, is right.”¹⁷ Sumner asserts that while morality is necessarily relative, there *can* be “good” and “bad” mores (insofar as they are, or are not, well adapted to a culture’s particular situation). In this sense, the mores are either right or wrong. When people of a culture begin to question the mores, Sumner argues this is merely an indication that the mores are about to adjust and “shift accordingly.”¹⁸ Yet, Sumner does not provide an adequate account for what causes people to question these mores in the first place. Furthermore, the mores cannot determine what is right and wrong, and good and bad, while at the same time being subject to the classification of being either right or wrong, and good or bad, themselves.¹⁹ Accordingly, they cannot account for morality. When mores begin to shift, what is right, is *not* what is. If it were the case that what is right is determined merely by *what is*, the mores would not shift.²⁰ Sumner’s attempt to demonstrate that morality is relative, due to the changing determination of cultural mores, is inherently inconsistent. It requires that we posit that what is right is subject to something that could be wrong.

¹⁵ *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. 2007, Columbia University Press.

¹⁶ William Graham Sumner, “A Defense of Cultural Relativism”, from *Folkways*, 1907. Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press. Pg 147

¹⁷ *Ibid* Pg 144

¹⁸ *Ibid* Pg 146

¹⁹ This is true even at the most fundamental level. If the more of a culture is capable of being bad, and subject to change, this means that it in such instances, the more is wrong. If the more is wrong, then it cannot reasonably be presumed to correctly determine what is right and wrong, as it is wrong itself.

²⁰ According to Sumner’s argument, what is right is merely whatever ‘is’, and what ‘is’ is determined solely by a culture’s mores. He claims that these mores ‘shift’ when they are no longer suited to a culture’s particular situation, thus changing what is right. But then, what is right is not determined by the mores, but rather, by a culture’s particular situation.

When the members of a particular culture reject their own culture's ethical principle(s), it seems apparent that morality is not culturally relative. In *Cultural Relativism and Universal Rights*, Carolyn Fleuhr-Lobban explains that there exist universal moral principles and human rights which supersede cultural relativism, as well as particular moral policies relative to cultures. She discusses the issue of female circumcision, a medical procedure condoned, and even encouraged, by Sudan's current ethical policies. The procedure is both harmful and dangerous, of which "chronic infections are a common result, and sexual intercourse and childbirth are rendered difficult and painful"²¹. The ethical policies of Sudan permit this procedure, even when, as is often the case, it is performed against the patient's will. The fact that many individuals within this particular culture find this ethical policy immoral and leave, seeking asylum elsewhere, demonstrates that morality is not culturally relative. It is morally wrong to force unnecessary suffering upon others. This is a universal, objective, moral truth. As Fleuhr-Lobban asserts, not only does cultural relativism not imply moral relativism, but also, while "we need to be sensitive to cultural differences, [we should] not allow them to override widely recognized human rights."²²

Pojman on Sumner & Moral Relativism in General

Louis Pojman presents the premises and conclusion for ethical relativism as follows:

- 1.) *The Diversity Thesis*: What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so that there are no moral principles accepted by all societies.
- 2.) *The Dependency Thesis*: All moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance.
- 3.) *Ethical Relativism*: Therefore, there are no universally valid moral principles, objective standards which apply to all people everywhere at all times.²³

It is evident that the Diversity Thesis, which can be understood as cultural relativism, neither establishes the truth of ethical relativism, nor is it in any way an essential part of the relativist argument.²⁴ Therefore, the premise essential to the relativist argument is that of the Dependency Thesis. As is the case with all relativist arguments, Sumner's argument that morality is the mere

²¹ Ibid Pg 151

²² Carolyn Fleuhr-Lobban, "Cultural Relativism and Universal Rights", In Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press Pg 152

²³ Louis Pojman, "Who's to Judge", Christina Hoff Sommers and Fred Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Seventh edition. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth Press. Pg 171-2

²⁴ The denial of cultural relativism does not disprove moral relativism. Consequently it is not a relevant or necessary premise for the moral relativist argument.

byproduct of cultural mores is contingent upon the belief that “individual acts are right or wrong depending on the nature of the society from which they emanate.”²⁵ The Dependency Thesis argues that “right” and “wrong” are determined by the context in which they occur, rather than by the objective state of these things in themselves. Pojman explains that this thesis can be taken in two ways: as the weak dependency thesis, which argues that the way moral principles are (or are not) *applied* in particular cultures is relative to the culture’s beliefs, history, etc., and as the strong dependency thesis (the one appealed to by moral relativist Sumner and various others) which argues that moral principles *themselves* are relative to a culture’s beliefs, history, etc.²⁶

Most moral absolutists have no issues with the weak dependency thesis, this is because the idea that the application of moral principles varies from culture to culture seems more or less evident, and in no way threatens moral absolutism. However, the Weak Dependency Thesis cannot adequately establish moral relativism, as it makes no distinct claims pertaining to the state of the moral principles themselves. It is therefore only the strong dependency thesis that raises any sort of argument against moral absolutism. In doing so however, it ultimately falls short. There is no compelling reason why one should choose the strong Dependency Thesis over the weak one. On the other hand, there *is* a compelling argument as to why we ought to choose the weak Dependency Thesis. In allowing for the contention that morality is universal and absolute, the weak dependency thesis allows for the judgement of moral practices, and thereby promotes an evolution toward the determination of universally appropriate ethical action. When we accept the weak dependency thesis, we are able to reason upon ethical standards in order to make a case for one system over another. We may not be able to *know* with certainty that our moral beliefs are closer to the truth than those of another culture, or those of other individuals within our own, but we may be justified in *believing* that they are.²⁷

Pojman concludes his essay responding to the question posed by moral relativists, “Whose to judge what’s right or wrong?” asserting, “*We are*. We are to do so on the basis of the best reasoning we can bring forth and with sympathy and understanding.”²⁸ One objection moral relativists make against Pojman’s conclusion that *we* are to judge, is that such a conclusion is necessarily intolerant and egocentric. Since there are innumerable communities with alternative

²⁵ Ibid Pg 166

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid Pg 173

²⁸ Ibid

views and judgments, how are *we* justified in favoring our judgments over theirs?²⁹ The problem with this question is that it assumes that cultural relativism is in some way relevant to moral relativism; it has already been established that this is not the case. In saying that we are to judge, Pojman is not suggesting that we, the American people, Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, European Union, or members of any other particular culture or subculture, are justified in judging the ethical principles of others. The moral relativist who believes that this is the case is sorely mistaken. It is this very discriminatory sense of cultural and moral identity that has fostered cultural narcissism and discrimination. In fact, one might argue that it is the moral relativist who is egocentric, for relativists who refuse to commit themselves to a particular moral judgment are holding themselves above their own ethical theory, separating themselves from their own culture's ethical principles.³⁰ In concluding that we are to judge, Pojman does not attempt to draw a distinction between cultures in the way that moral relativists do. In this sense, 'we', like morality, is universal, applying to people of all cultures from all over the world. It is our duty, as a universal whole, to judge the ethical principles of others, making use of the best judgment that we have, for the sake of universal human rights.

Conclusion:

Although, on the whole, moral relativist's intentions are good, their argument is fundamentally flawed. Something cannot be both subjective and objective at the same time, yet that is exactly what conventionalists like Ruth Benedict purport. Moral relativists, like Sumner, fail to account for the members of particular societies who have rejected their own culture's current ethical principles and practices, demonstrating that there exist universal moral principles, which transcend cultural divides. In fact, moral relativists fail to provide an adequate account for how such cultural boundaries are even determined. Cultural relativism is evident, but it does not necessitate, prove, or demand moral relativism. Since cultural relativism is not relevant to the establishment of moral relativism, The Diversity Thesis is a non-essential premise.

Consequently, the only premise essential to the moral relativist argument is that of The Dependency Thesis. The Dependency Thesis can be taken in two ways: either as the assertion that the *application* of moral principles is culturally relative (the weak version), or as the claim

²⁹ Ibid Pg 174

³⁰ One should also note that in doing this, the moral relativist more or less undermines the ethical relativist theory by demonstrating that, at the very least, a person's moral beliefs are, not entirely relative to his or her own culture.

that *morals themselves* are culturally relative (the strong version). The weak version of the Dependency Thesis poses no threat to moral absolutism, and seems more or less self-evident. And, unlike the weak Dependency Thesis, there is no compelling reason we should accept the strong one. Moreover, moral relativists who claim to refrain from passing judgment on the moral practices and ethical principles of other cultures, necessarily separate themselves from their own ethical theory, thus undermining their own assertions. Moral relativism does not foster cultural tolerance, but rather allows for the deprivation and violation of universal human rights. It is not simply that we are justified in passing judgment upon controversial ethical principles, such as those which allow the unjustified murder of innocent people³¹ or the unsanitary and inhumane treatment of men and women³², it is our duty as members of an international community to pass such judgments, and act accordingly.

³¹ As seen with the unethical practices of the Kwakiutl tribe

³² As seen with Sudan's allowance of female circumcision